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Born Male, Becoming a Man

Over the last forty years, despite second-wave feminism, assumptions that male presuppositions undergird American culture have remained in place. Because of implicit patriarchy, it is thought, the signals both men and women absorb unconsciously from the world around them, in the process of socialization, make male images and identity appear normative. This view resounds in the words of Simone de Beauvoir, whose observation that one is born female but becomes a woman, forms the basis for the title of this review. Cultural stereotypes abound, to be sure, but they must be internalized by both men and women.[1]

Feminist writers over the last several decades have offered countless studies of how women absorb values and ideas about proper thought and behavior from the culture around them, often to their detriment when those images suggest inferiority or subordination of female to male. At the same time, as literary historian Ann Douglas demonstrated in *The Feminization of American Culture* (1977), despite the consignment of women's sphere to the home, a process of feminization from the nineteenth century forward altered the core of the culture, even if it did not dismantle gender stereotypes. However, far fewer have looked at the parallel processes for men and the forces that sustained male stereotypes of masculinity even in a feminized culture– perhaps because, traditionally, the male was presumed to be the norm.

Folklorists and students of material culture have also long known that many of the cues for shaping identity come in informal ways, not always in the art and literature of high culture, and are likewise transmitted from one generation to the next outside of formal education. Simply put, men learn something about what it means to be a man from listening to stories told by other men, watching other men at work and play, and sensing what sorts of behavior in men are lauded and what are ridiculed. The same goes for young women interacting with other women. For both men and women, then, gender may be biological but a gender identity is acquired.

How does one who is born male become a man? The authors of the twelve essays in this volume and the editor hope to impress on readers how a range of masculinities or ways of becoming a man get communicated to those born male in America. The first six focus on displays and performances, while the latter six look at expressions of masculinity in texts, stories, and kindred lore. Many are informed not only by folklore methodologies, but also by Freudian understandings of subtexts found in such phenomena as material objects, public displays, and vernacular rhyme. Hence there is a preoccupation with phallic images, implicit or explicit, and an assumption that sexual performance is a primary ingredient of all masculine identities. Even the anthology's subtitle is to the point; its reference to the "roots" of masculinities plays on one slang term for penis.

None of the essays addresses, however, what one might call the "chicken and egg" question. That is, do the images of primal strength, sensuality, and sexual prowess pervading male performances and folk texts result in an understanding among males of what it means to be men or is the culture so awash with these images that folk traditions emerge to perpetuate them? After all, sensuality, strength, and sexual prowess are not unique to American folk culture, but are found in places as diverse as ancient Pompeii and south India. In the last analysis, readers are left to wonder whether folk traditions produce the stereotypes of masculinity or the stereotypes produce the folk traditions. Holding this issue at bay also means that the authors avoid making judgments about whether the images they find in these displays and other expressions are good: should they be normative or not?

Let us look briefly at each of the essays. Following a heavily theoretical prologue on "menfolk" by editor Simon Bronner, Gary Alan Fine demonstrates how women who wish to be accepted in previously all-male

groups must learn to deal with sexually charged banter and ribald jokes; in other words, they must become "one of the boys" in behavior and attitude. If folk culture assigns African-American men extraordinary sensuality and sexuality, then the refined practice of stepping or "running the yard" is designed to perpetuate such images, as Tom Mould's essay argues. Latino immigrant men, whose culture gives us the nomenclature of macho, sustain *machismo* in everything from clothing and body adornment to jokes that are part of adolescent coming-of-age rituals, according to Norma Cantu. Japanese-American men, as Hideyo Konagaya explains, face a different dilemma, for white culture perceives them to be small of stature, subordinate, and weak; hence the popularity of *taiko*, with its reliance on strength and physical power, brings them into the American cultural mainstream of masculinity. Two pieces probe presumably alternative masculinities. Anthony Avery looks at the more feminized appearance of men who participate in raves, while Mickey Weems explores sensuality (but not necessarily overt sexuality) among gay men who are part of the "Circuit" or urban parties drawing thousands and marked by ecstatic dancing as well as much illicit drug use. Yet both authors show that behind these alternative displays lies an affirmation of masculinity as vibrant and strong. They represent what anthropologists delineate as "liminality" or a time of "communitas" between the affirmation of more socially accepted identities.[2]

The second section opens with Jay Mechlin using feminist-based theory to explore how and why men seem so fascinated with jokes about the penis as a way of affirming a masculine identity separate from that of the mothers or women who raised them. Greg Kelley probes those folk tales where men are granted wishes that will be fulfilled and turn to wealth, power, and sexual conquest, only to wind up in an unanticipated predicament where the final wish requires abandoning all that they had anticipated. Contemporary legends with male characters launch a discussion by W. F. H. Nicolaisen, though he moves little beyond noting that sexual angst consumes most of them, without telling us how or why. Oral traditions circulating among Southern mountain hillbillies, with their fascination with primal, almost uncivilized power along with sexual energy come under scrutiny in a provocative essay by W. K. McNeil on the jokes and stories these men tell about themselves; the one who looks the fool is indeed often far from foolish. Simon Bronner then analyzes the sexual meaning implicit in the folk carvings, from coffin men and barrel men to canes, crafted by older men who have presumably lost their virility; in these pieces of folk art they not only defy impending death, but they also reaffirm the centrality of erections and sexual power to male identity. Bronner joins with Ronald Baker, to whom the anthology is dedicated to offer a final essay, before an afterword by Alan Dundes. Baker and Bronner look particularly at how songs, folk verse, and the like sustain an understanding of masculinity that emphasizes not only penis size but also extraordinary masturbatory ability.

Together, the essays offer a telling journey into the folklore of masculinity, although as I have suggested, what gets emphasized is by no means unique to American folklore. But they also tell us that, for better or worse, the subliminal signals American culture sends to those born male are that masculine identity is determined by sexuality and power, even in those displays that elevate an alternative masculinity. For the alternative still presumes that something else is the norm. With these essays in hand, however, other folklorists, psychologists, anthropologists, sociologists, and cultural historians are better poised to begin to assess whether these masculine identities are helpful or harmful both for individual men and for the commonweal.

Notes

[1]. See Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parskley (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952).

[2]. Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle C. Caffee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960); and Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Aldine, 1969).

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